

Agencies may need to replace radios

Fort Morgan Times (Morgan County, CO) By Dan Barker

July 24, 2014

A project to upgrade the Morgan County Communications Center equipment is nearly done, but area emergency responders will now have to think about replacing all of their hand-held radios.

That could be expensive with newer models selling for \$2,000 to \$3,500 apiece.

The \$1.1 million computerized equipment upgrade will mean MCCC will be capable of anything it will need to do in the foreseeable future, and will meet requirements expected from the Federal Communications Commission, said MCCC Director Danette Martin during Tuesday's meeting of the center's board.

The Pawnee repeater tower is fully complete, and has been up and running for about three weeks, she said. A tower that will provide coverage for the western and southwestern portions of the county is about 90 percent complete, and the dispatch center is about 85 percent complete.

"We're moving right along," Martin said, and center staff are hoping to be done by the middle of August.

Clint Goldenstein of Wireless Advanced — the company that supplies the center with its equipment — talked to the board members about the future of emergency responder's radios.

Colorado is upgrading to a new radio system which uses both the 700 and 800 megahertz frequency ranges, he said. There has been some concern that agencies will have to abandon their 800 megahertz equipment, but that is not happening. Many of the radios that responders have right now can use both ranges of frequencies.

And every radio purchased after 2005 has that capability, Goldenstein said.

A number of communications centers in the state are changing over to the FirstNet system, which will provide emergency responders with the first nationwide, high-speed network dedicated to public safety. It uses the 700 megahertz spectrum.

In fact, Adams County has a pilot project for FirstNet, which will allow the use of streaming video and computer record checks, Goldenstein said.

Nationwide migration to FirstNet or similar systems will be a long-term process, he said.

Also, the FCC is considering a 700 narrow banding mandate for all emergency systems in the nation by 2017, Goldstein said. Narrow banding means having equipment that can receive frequencies on a much tighter focus, which leaves room for other frequencies people can use. The same thing was done for the 800 megahertz system a number of years ago.

The FCC has not made the decision yet, but it is expected it will announce something in the fall, he said.

The new upgrades at the Morgan County Communications Center will meet that narrow-banding requirement, but not all local radios will, Goldenstein said.

Many Colorado centers are requesting waivers from the FCC requirement until 2022, but the agency has not made any rulings on those yet, Goldenstein said.

If the FCC grants those waivers, it will make it easier for communications centers to pull together the funding for necessary radios that can cope with narrow band communications, he said.

The time will come when current radios will no longer work, Goldstein warned.

Motorola is cancelling the line of radios many responders use today by October. That means that the company should give them a five-year window of support, but after that there will be no more support or repairs, he said.

Motorola is releasing its Apex series of hand-held radios, which has narrow-banding capacity, and which will allow responders to make better use of the infrastructure that will be in place.

For example, one feature is that repeaters could broadcast two messages at the same time, reducing clogged communications traffic, Goldstein said.

Price ranges vary depending on the kind of radio. Those can range from a radio that has all the capabilities to those with just the basics, and even a stealth model for use in undercover investigations, he said.

Centers can buy radios through the state, and the state is receiving a substantial discount from Motorola. Also, if an area wanted to change all of its radios over at once, there might be an additional discount, Goldstein said.

However, there are no government grants for this yet, he said.

There is a Motorola grant team which helps agencies to find funding for the change. While the team does not write the grant request, it does help edit it, Goldstein said.

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